

IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research findings at a glance from the
Institute of Development Studies

IDS WORKING PAPER 363
MARCH 2011

States of Citizenship

Contexts and Cultures of Public Engagement and Citizen Action

Throughout the 2000s, development agendas have emphasised democratic reform and the promotion of citizenship. But prevailing discourses on governance may overlook the multiplicity of forms that citizenship can take. This paper challenges the assumptions underpinning the concept of citizenship, arguing for a wider understanding that considers power relations as well as context.

How people perceive the state, and how the state perceives them, can shape what it means to be a citizen. Yet prevailing debates on development and governance say very little about the state-citizen relationship and the extent to which different kinds of states enable different kinds of citizenships. This paper argues there is a mismatch between standard concepts of participation and the actual engagement that people experience in their encounters with the state. By drawing on literature and case study research on the global South, it seeks to shed light on the multi-layered, often highly contingent negotiations that characterise citizens' engagements with the state.

Development narratives often view citizen engagement through the binary lens of state-civil society relations. Governance orthodoxies split the world into 'effective' or 'failed/fragile' states. Such labels, the authors contend, can de-contextualise the

conception of governance and skew the perception of citizenship.

Donors have been pre-occupied with 'strengthening' civil society and 'state capacity' for more than a decade. The authors argue that this has led to generalisations about the state and civil society which do not match reality – for example, the assumption that the state is amenable to sharing power and being more accountable; or that civil society is a 'good-in-itself' and a fount for democratising influences.

For some people, citizenship is defined by a lack of rights and respect, or a lack of entitlement and identity. What being a citizen means, the authors note, is contingent on aspects of context, which most debates on citizenship neglect. The paper argues that for many poor people, the 'state' is an elusive notion, a void that may come to be filled by less virtuous forms of belonging, such as criminal syndicates, gangs, warlords and patrons of

various sorts. The paper explores contrasting views among the poor from Bangladesh, Brazil, India and South Africa of their entitlements and the state's remit. It also notes that contact with progressive non government organisations pursuing a rights agenda has influenced people's perceptions of their rights and entitlements, for example Bangladeshi women's changing awareness of gender discrimination.

Spaces for citizen participation may now exist in some countries but these are not exempt from the pressure of societal norms, including normative ideas about who should participate, the paper adds. These norms obstruct active citizenship.

The paper concludes with an assessment of where emerging concepts of citizenship leave liberal modernist views of democracy and development thinking.

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Key research findings

- The case studies question the idea that opening up democratic spaces automatically guarantees democratic self-representation. Often only after crossing the threshold of self-representation can marginalised people be included.
- Other case studies show new forms of citizen participation emerging among poor people in the broader nexus of democracy and marginalisation. Some of these may be created by external actors (donors, state); others are formed by marginalised people themselves. Some challenge existing state institutions at local level; others help to mediate between the state and the marginalised.
- Some of the new democratic spaces however, come more to resemble old forms of disempowerment and exclusion. Questions arise about whose voices are raised, who frames the arguments and selects the issues.
- Different ways of assessing what democracy means emerge: civil society and the public sphere may need to be viewed more as manifestations of an agonistic politics, than of a pre-given political liberal order.

The quest for an all-encompassing definition of citizenship is an empty one, the authors conclude. Citizenship is a deeply political, multi-layered process that can only be guaranteed by multiplying the spaces, institutions, discourses

and forms of life that foster identification with democratic values.

But democracy is not primarily about the realisation of consensus. Tension, exclusions and power struggles are encountered in any attempt to construct agreement within a community. Democracy and democratic citizenship require shared understandings less than they need multiple public places and points of reference through which these understandings can be organised.

Policy lessons/implications

- Pay greater analytical attention to the various acts of negotiating citizenship in a multiplicity of spaces, across different experiences of democracy.
- Look beyond static binaries of state/civil society, individual/society, to yield a fuller understanding of citizenship and of the interplay between context and contingency.
- Study how citizens' identities are affected by power relations and the political practices of inclusion and exclusion.
- Find strategies to broaden engagement, as well as provide new ways to address old concerns of representation and legitimacy.
- For democratic politics, the main question is not how to eliminate power, but how to build forms of power compatible with democratic values.

Credits

Andrea Cornwall, Steven Robins and Bettina Von Lieres (2011), *States of Citizenship: Contexts and Cultures of Public Engagement and Citizen Action*, IDS Working Paper 363, Brighton: IDS

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